TMS Member Profiles

Meet a Member: Vinko Potocnik and His Life-Long Love of Languages

By Lynne Robinson

Vinko Potocnik collects languages, with the mastery of words and their nuance of thought a challenge that he has relished since his boyhood in Slovenia.

"My native country is very small and people are encouraged from childhood to learn foreign languages," he said. "I learned Serbo-Croatian first in elementary school and found it was fun when I was able to speak to local people on my first holiday at the Croatian seaside."

From there, Potocnik tackled English while still in elementary school and then studied French and Latin in high school, while learning Italian on his own. "When I met foreigners, I always tried to speak their language as much as I could. I saw that this was greatly appreciated," he said.

Once at university, Potocnik selected his languages to learn based on professional necessity, as well as personal interest. "I studied physics from English textbooks, which I could not afford to buy. But, then I found that Russian physics and mathematics books were much cheaper, so I learned Russian quickly on my own," he said. When his

first job—a research project on electric arcs—required collaboration with a German company, he learned German to communicate effectively with his colleagues and to read German technical articles that were not available in English. His love of salsa music compelled him to learn Spanish, and then, just for fun, he took up Italian and Portuguese.

Now an aluminum reduction technology consultant based in Jonquière, Quebec, Canada, Potocnik, a TMS member since 1987, has found his mental library of languages to be particularly useful when attending the TMS Annual Meetings, which he describes as "the largest gathering of professionals in the aluminum industry in the world."

"I have used all the languages I speak to communicate with attendees from different countries," he said. "It is fun to see how surprised they are when somebody speaks to them in their own language when they do not expect it."

"I travel a lot in my work and speak these languages at every opportunity," Potocnik continued. "It is a great plea-

sure and motivation to see how much easier it is to establish contact with people in their own language. Being able to work in French, Russian, and Spanish has been particularly useful."

Potocnik's love of languages has also served him well in his travels of the world in search of adventure, from mountain climbing in the French Pyrenees, the Swiss Alps, and the top of Mount Rainier, to scuba diving in the Caribbean and Australia, to windsurfing on the Adriatic Sea. "Languages help, if only to socialize," he said.

Also an avid ballroom dancer, Potocnik said that exploring new languages still ranks first among his many other interests. "It is my most challenging hobby, requiring patience, persistence, repetition, and continuous learning," he said. "At the same time, it is also the most rewarding and I am looking forward to the days when I will have more time for languages."

Potocnik, who is currently working on mastering Arabic, notes that gaining fluency in a different language involves much more than memorizing words and verb tenses. "Learning a language is a discovery of a new culture," he said. "And, understanding and appreciating other cultures is important in these times of globalization. Speaking more than one language is a necessity today, and will be even more so in the future."

"The need to speak several languages isn't new," Potocnik continued. "An old Roman saying was 'Quot linguas calles, tot homines vales,' meaning, 'You are worth as many people as the number of languages you speak.'"

Each month, *JOM* profiles a TMS member and his or her activities both in and out of the realm of materials science and engineering. To suggest a candidate for this feature, contact Maureen Byko, *JOM* editor, at mbyko@tms.org.

Figure 1. Potocnik takes in the view atop the mountains in Zermatt, Switzerland. He notes that his mastery of a number of languages has served him well in his mountain climbing adventures around the world.

Figure 2. Potocnik and his wife, Marie-Claude Goyette, enjoy scuba diving off Heron Island in Australia.